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ABSTRACT

Alternative instructional delivery options such as self-paced and flexible enrollment courses are designed to increase enrollment, promote retention, and encourage student success without lowering academic standards. The Fast Track Associate's Degree Program, developed by a team of faculty, staff, and administrators at Richland Community College, is an alternative delivery option that allows students to earn an Associate of Arts and Sciences degree within one year through intensive daytime courses or within less than two years (approximately 20 months) through evening courses. A student can enroll anytime during the year, never has to wait longer than four weeks for a course to start, and always has a choice of several courses in which to enroll. Begun in the fall of 1996, the Fast Track Program serves more than 100 students, the majority of which are 18-year olds who want to complete an associate's degree quickly and move on to the university. Faculty expressed concern that courses might become "watered down" due to the compressed time frame and that part-time faculty might be overused to teach courses. On the positive side, faculty found that class dynamics and length of the class period are conducive to cooperative and collaborative teaching and learning strategies. (AS)

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# Fast Track Option: An Accelerated Associate's Degree Program

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## Fast Track Option: An Accelerated Associate's Degree Program

## J. Randall Price, Ph.D.

Offering college courses in alternative delivery options, such as self-paced courses, telecourses, and flexible entry enrollment, has been a priority in the Dallas County Community Colleges since the system's inception. Alternative delivery options are designed to serve many purposes-meet the changing needs of a community, increase enrollment, promote retention, and encourage student success-without lowering academic standards. At Richland College, which is part of the Dallas County system, the Fast Track option has been initiated to make available yet another delivery mode.

## Overview of the Fast Track Option

Accelerated or condensed courses have been offered at both two- and four-year colleges at times other than the traditional fall and spring academic semester, including summer term, Mayterm, and winter term. Also, many academic institutions have experimented with a Weekend College, for which courses are often condensed and accelerated. Although never widespread in two-year colleges, the quarter system is a type of condensed course program.

The development of the Fast Track Associate's Degree Program at Richland College began with a team of Richland College faculty, staff, and administrators examining and analyzing enrollment and retention data from condensed format courses taught over a three-year period. The data show that courses offered over a condensed time frame promote student success and better retention than courses of traditional length.

Based on that fact and the notion that offering more options for course delivery increases enrollment, the team at Richland College concluded that the intensified alternative delivery format should be expanded and focused into an innovative avenue for students to earn an associate's degree.

Begun in the fall of 1996, the Fast Track Degree Program is an option at Richland College that allows students to earn an Associate of Arts and Sciences degree within one year through intensive daytime courses or within less than two years (approximately 20 months) through evening courses. Of course, this makes it possible for the motivated student to complete a bachelor's degree in three years.

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Courses and electives required for the completion of the associate's degree are offered over four four-week terms during the full-length traditional semester. To earn the associate's degree during the day in 12 months, the student enrolls in two courses each four-week term in the fall and spring terms, one course during the winter term, one course during the Mayterm, and four courses during the two summer terms. A few of the courses, such as laboratory sciences, are offered in six- or eight-week terms.

Of course, the Fast Track options are not designed to replace the traditional academic semester schedule, but to offer more flexible course options and entry points for students. Students may mix Fast Track courses with regularly paced courses.

One important feature of this program is that the courses are scheduled sequentially and repeatedly. A student can enroll virtually any time during the year, never has to wait longer than four weeks for a course to start, and always has a choice of several courses in which to enroll. If a student needs to "stop out" because of illness, a family emergency, or an extremely busy time in his or her life, an entire four-month semester is not lost. That student can re-enroll and "start up" in as few as four weeks.

Following is an example of a Fast Track calendar, including winter term, Mayterm, and summer terms (from 1996-1997):

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|---|---|---|
| Fall 1 Aug. 26-Sept. 19<br>Fall 2 Sept. 23-Oct. 17<br>Fall 3 Oct. 21-Nov. 14<br>Fall 4 Nov. 18-Dec. 12<br><br>Winter term Dec. 17-19<br>Jan. 2-10 (Mon.-Fri.) | Spring 1 Jan. 13-Feb. 6<br>Spring 2 Feb. 10-March 6<br>Spring 3 March 10-April 10<br>Spring 4 April 14-May 8 | Mayterm May 12-30<br>(Mon.-Fri.)<br><br>Summer 1 June 2-July 3<br>Summer 2 July 10-Aug. 12 |

Scheduled breaks include Thanksgiving, about one and a half weeks in December and January, spring break, and about one and a half weeks at the end of Summer 2, as well as applicable national holidays. The complete Fast Track Associate's Degree plan is published in the Richland College catalog and in the fall and spring schedules of classes. The transferability of Fast Track courses is no different from that of regular semester-length courses. Tuition and fees for Fast Track courses are the same as those for traditional semester-length courses at Richland College (at $54 for a 3-credit-hour course, one of the lowest in the United States).

Classes in the Fast Track program are intensive. Students attend four days per week (Monday-Thursday) for three hours per day. The morning class time is 8:30 to 11:30 a.m.; the afternoon is 12:30 to 3:30 p.m. Evening classes meet from 6:45 to 9:45 p.m. The hours and days during which classes are held winter term, Mayterm, and summer terms are adjusted as required.

Since Fast Track courses are very intensive, the workload is demanding. Students are advised that the homework is extra heavy and that the typical ratio of at least one hour of study time for each hour in class also applies to Fast Track courses (which necessitates the three-day weekend). Students who choose to enroll full time with the intention of completing the degree requirements in 12 months must be eligible (through placement test results) to enroll directly into college-level course work. If developmental courses are needed, they must be completed before the student enrolls in Fast Track courses.

## Student Perspective on the Fast Track Option

The administrators and faculty who developed the Fast Track Associate's Degree Program originally predicted that the majority of the students who would choose the accelerated program would be older students who were returning to school, possibly those who were displaced from the work force in the middle of the traditional semester or were in a transitional stage in their life for a variety of reasons. While those students are found in the Fast Track Program at Richland College, the majority of the more than 100 students selecting the Fast Track option so far are 18-year-olds who are in a hurry to earn an associate's

degree and move on to a university.

Fast Track student evaluations are positive, focusing mainly on the perceived value of being able to complete a program in a shorter time and transfer to a four-year school. Like other young community college students, many of the Fast Track students enrolled at Richland College either to save money or to prove themselves as a student. The Fast Track option allows those students to "serve less time" in the process of validating their academic self.

Especially among the 18-year-old student population, the Fast Track students are seriously motivated and report that the accelerated program facilitates attention, concentration, and retention. The intensity of the courses resulting from the fact that they meet several hours daily could be described as an "immersion" phenomenon for the student.

Students also report that they develop a strong sense of community in their Fast Track courses, since they can spend several hours per day in course after course with the same students. Negative comments center on the "homework factor"-in classes such as literature, there is often inadequate time to complete the reading assignments. Courses that allow for catching up on the assignments during the three-day weekend are perceived as being more positive by the Fast Track students.

The older adult students have not overlooked the Fast Track Program at Richland College. In fact, the first graduate of the Fast Track program was a man in his forties with no postsecondary education who had worked for more than a decade with the same company, advancing to the position of vice president before the company went bankrupt and he was out of a job.

To be able to return to the work force with suitable employment skills, the man felt that he needed to earn a college degree, and he needed to do so as quickly as possible because of his age and financial resources. He completed his associate's degree at Richland College in eight months with a 3.76 grade point average. He is now working on a bachelor's degree. Such men and women at risk for either leaving the educational system or not entering at all may be well served by the Fast Track Associate's Degree Program.

## Faculty Perspective on the Fast Track Option

Faculty members have mixed feelings about this accelerated program. Some are concerned about "watering down" the course, since they are required to cover the same syllabus that they would in a regularly paced course. The compressed time makes detailed coverage particularly difficult in a course that requires a great deal of reading and writing. The turnaround time for grading assignments is also demanding. Since the time for preparation is limited, the course should be one that the instructor has taught before, ideally, many times, and the materials must be completed before the class even begins. Faculty need leave time and administrative support to plan thoughtfully and develop the course materials.

Full-time faculty have special concerns about teaching courses in the Fast Track program. First and foremost, full-time faculty need administrative assurance that, if necessary, Fast Track courses will "make" even if enrollment is low. For an innovative program such as the Fast Track Associate's Degree Program to survive, such administrative support is necessary.

Second, most full-time faculty will have to mix and match their teaching load between regularly paced semester-long classes and Fast Track classes; therefore, scheduling preferences must be allowed for full-time faculty involved in a Fast Track program.

In some cases, a full-time instructor might be able to teach only Fast Track courses, which has several advantages. The full-time, Fast Track-only faculty member is better able to keep up the pace as he or she

becomes more accustomed to the accelerated schedule, in a fashion similar to teaching summer school. Also, the full-time, Fast Track-only faculty member might have the option of a vacation at a time of the year unheard of for a teacher, such as October.

Third, the "overuse" of part-time or adjunct faculty to teach Fast Track courses is likely. Depending on many factors, this has several disadvantages. The overuse of part-time faculty typically decreases the stability of a program. Further, in some states, teaching two Fast Track courses during the same period of time may be cause for full-time employment status, leading to increased costs in benefits. Locating part-time faculty to teach essentially half a day for one month at a time might prove to be difficult in some areas of the country and in some disciplines.

The sense of camaraderie and group cohesiveness in the Fast Track courses has advantages and disadvantages. Some faculty have commented on feeling at the beginning of the term like outsiders to their Fast Track classes. The students may have been in several classes together and know each other so well that group dynamics are far beyond those on the typical first day of class.

On the positive side, the class dynamics and the length of the class period are very conducive to cooperative and collaborative teaching and learning strategies. And once the term is under way, faculty typically come to know the Fast Track students better than they know students in traditional, regularly paced courses, in a way similar to learning summer school students' names more quickly.

During the Fall 3 Fast Track term of 1996 and during the Mayterm of 1997, I taught a Fast Track section of Human Sexuality. The experience for me (a semi-burned out teacher of 26 years) was invigorating. The students were motivated, and the format fit my own attention span and ability to focus. Student success was impressive. Out of 25 Fast Track students in the Fall 3 term, only three did not complete the course, and two of the three never "engaged" in the course at all. All but one student who finished had only zero or one absence.

Using the same tests as in the regularly paced courses that semester, I found no significant differences between the test scores of the Fast Track and the regular semester students. Comparing letter grades in the courses revealed significantly fewer D's and F's in the Fast Track courses, but no other significant differences in the letter grade distributions.

Although a direct comparison of student evaluations was not possible, every Fast Track student in Human Sexuality rated the course as either "outstanding" or "good," and all students reported that they intended to take other courses in the Fast Track format. The course experience for me was positive. I enjoyed teaching a summer school-paced course in the middle of a regular semester, and, if scheduling difficulties can be overcome, I will return to this format in the future.

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*Randy Price teaches psychology at Richland College of the Dallas County Community College District (DCCCD), where he has been on the faculty for nearly 23 years. A native of Dallas, Price obtained his B.S., M.S., and Ph.D. from the University of North Texas. He also completed a clinical internship at the Baylor Institute of Rehabilitation of the Baylor University Medical Center and a postdoctoral fellowship at the University of Kentucky.*

*The DCCCD is a seven-campus district begun in 1966, with the El Centro campus in downtown Dallas. Richland is the largest of the campuses, with nearly 12,000 students. More information about Richland College and the Fast Track program can be obtained at http://www.rlc.dcccd.edu/.*

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***Additional copies of this occasional paper may be obtained by writing the editor at Pellissippi State Technical Community College, P.O. Box 22990, Knoxville, Tennessee 37933-0990. Copies are $3.00 each, including cost of mailing. Make checks payable to SACJTC, the Southern Association of Community, Junior, and Technical Colleges.***